How to (Not) Raise a Reductionist: Reassessing the Paradigms of Child Rearing for an Age of Flourishing

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“We thought of life by analogy with a journey, with a pilgrimage, which had a serious purpose at that end, and the thing was to get to that thing at that end. Success, or whatever it is, or maybe heaven after you’re dead.

But we missed the point the whole way along.

It was a musical thing, and you were supposed to sing or to dance while the music was being played.”

- Alan Watts

We learn to master some of the most complex tasks at the earliest age and without any kind of formal instruction. Witnessing a toddler speak his first words or take her first steps is a special moment in the lives of parents, especially because they happen in the most unexpected ways and without much of their input. These kinds of developmental milestones are the miraculous byproduct of a child’s intuitive and playful engagement with the world, but unfortunately many of us do not tend to trust this innate process of growth beyond the first few years. Before long, the well-intentioned adult will intervene and begin to direct, advise, judge, praise, reward, and discipline the child to ensure that they acquire the knowledge, skills, and habits deemed necessary for proper development. The implicit message this sends to children, however, is that the innate drive to engage with the world is not an adequate engine for growth. They will learn to believe that it requires external authority —parents, teachers, experts, and society at large—to direct their development, and that the more they rely on their advice, guidance, and services, the more accomplished they will be. Is it perhaps this particular control-oriented approach to child rearing, practiced in many kindergartens, schools, and homes today, that normalizes the reductionism Joi Ito is asking us to resist?

As current critics of compulsory education are pointing out, humans educated themselves long before the emergence of schooling, and experiences outside of the classroom are often more formative than the knowledge acquired through adult-imposed education. It may thus not necessarily be the individual child who is in need of instruction, but rather the social context the child is embedded in that requires each member to share a particular set of knowledge, skills, and habits necessary for maintaining the specific paradigms that it is organized upon. At different times
throughout its history, the education system has served various economic, political, religious, and secular interests. A central function of it today may be to initiate children into the values, beliefs, and habits of a consumer capitalist society. As MIT Media Lab alum Aaron Falbel claims,

“In our society, adulthood means primarily a life of consumption (having a job, earning money, buying things), so we introduce this idea early in our children’s experience by having them go through this ritualistic process of graded consumption that we call education.”

According to Falbel, the current education system is designed to accumulate prepackaged content as a form of “capital” in order to successfully advance through it. Most of the content that students engage with through curricula is retained only long enough to be reproduced in a test, at which point it is converted to academic credit and can be safely forgotten. The more academic credit students accumulate, the more valuable they are to competitive institutions of higher education, where the consumption of expensive expert instruction will earn them a degree of higher market value, so that they can get a higher earning job, engage in even more consumption, and keep the economy growing. Falbel argues:

“Education teaches the lesson that the more we consume, the better we are. That’s the lesson that our society needs people to imbibe for them to be successful and obedient consumers… you won’t find it printed in any curriculum plan. It’s the form and structure of education that inculcates this message, not the content.”

If we follow Falbel’s arguments, it may actually be the good student—the one who likes being instructed, derives satisfaction from accomplishing the tasks set for them, and thrives on the attention and approval of parents and teachers —for whom the education system can also perform the greatest disservice. All the focus on compliance, performance, and achievement distracts them from ever asking the question, “Who am I, and what do I want?”. In many ways, the political and social climate that we find ourselves in today resembles that of the late 1960s, which gave rise to a radical questioning of dysfunctional institutions. While the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the environmental movement are regaining momentum, the voices that called for liberating our children from reductive education systems seem almost forgotten.
The anti-education movement of the 1960s had, as one early precedent, the activism of Alexander Sutherland Neill, a Scottish educator who founded Summerhill, the prototype of the democratic school model, in 1921. Neill’s work centered on one basic idea: *Make the school fit the child, instead of making the child fit the school.* Summerhill had no curriculum, no testing, no grading, and no age segregation, and children and adults exercised equal rights through democratic decision-making on all aspects of school governance. Children spent their school time in whatever ways they found meaningful, without the unsolicited judgement, guidance, or intervention of adults. Anything was possible as long as it didn’t cause harm to other members of the community. Contrary to other child-centered models of alternative education, such as Montessori or Waldorf schools, which have curated a sophisticated learning environment based on specific educational intentions ultimately conceived and enforced by adults, the democratic organization of Summerhill resulted in a radically open learning environment in which children had the agency to shape the paradigm of learning itself. Describing the philosophy behind Summerhill, Neill argued:

“The function of the child is to live his own life—not the life that his anxious parents think he should live, nor a life according to the purpose of the educator who thinks he knows what is best. All this interference and guidance on the part of adults only produces a generation of robots.”

Neill’s pedagogic work enabled a diverse community of children, teachers, and parents to prioritize individual and shared wellbeing over the demands of society, especially when the two were in conflict with each other. As children grew up exploring and negotiating their intrinsic needs, values, and motivations as responsible members of a community, the democratized classroom encouraged them to develop a strong sense of purpose, which, it may be argued, is more vital to flourishing than any kind of imposed educational standard:

“You cannot make children learn [...] without to some degree converting them into will-less adults. You fashion them into acceptors of the status-quo—good thing for a society that needs obedient sitters at dreary desks, standers in shops, mechanical catchers of the 8:30 suburban train—a society, in short, that is carried on the shabby shoulders of the scared little man—the scared-to-death conformist.”

The establishment of Summerhill as an official school eventually turned the project into a highly political statement that managed to question an industrial model of education set up to train entire generations to derive meaning solely from economic
merit, instead of the other way around. As the first cohorts of Summerhill students graduated and managed to find their ways into colleges, workplaces, and other communities on their own terms, Neill had proven to a generation of parents and educators that children could thrive without being coerced into rigid educational standards. By the early 1970s, the book⁹ that introduced the Summerhill project to the rest of the world had sold three million copies and inspired the global free school movement as well as child-centered homeschooling approaches known as unschooling. One of the central convictions of self-directed education, as it has been carried out by free schools and unschoolers over recent decades, is that genuine learning is a fundamentally intrinsic process that tends to get corrupted through externally imposed teaching agendas. If children are given the freedom to direct their own learning in a nourishing and supportive environment instead, they will intuitively piece together the particular knowledge, skills, and habits that are necessary for them as individuals to find purpose in this environment.

Today’s climate of increasingly standardized test-driven schooling and so-called helicopter parenting seems inhospitable to the ethic of freeing our children that these previous movements embodied. As the filmmaker and grownup unschooler Astra Taylor notes,

“Today, the prospect of a book like Summerhill—one that paints a sympathetic portrait of kids who refuse to attend classes, do schoolwork, or obey authority—reaching an audience of millions seems absurd.”¹⁰

On the other hand, the world’s top education experts and business leaders are warning that our predominant industrial model of top-down instruction, age segregation, and standardized testing is failing to prepare young people for the 21st century job market. Today’s innovation economy, so the argument goes, rewards intrinsic motivation, critical thinking, and creative problem solving over compliance and test performance. While these skills have long been known to free schools and unschoolers as the happy side effects of the self-directed child, entrepreneurs are now leading the way with a whole range of creative learning toys, self-directed after-school programs, and micro-schools in which free play is repackaged as the new education paradigm for training our future innovators. This emergent brand of learning lab is often perfectly in tune with the current zeitgeist of Silicon Valley work environments: Children are encouraged to think outside the box, be collaborative, and, most importantly, scale their passions into promising learning projects. But just as in the new workplace, “There is no room for worker malaise”¹¹, there is often also little room for non-
participation in the new classroom. After all, it’s all about the children’s interests, not as though they’re doing it for anyone else—or at least they’re made to feel that they’re not doing it for anyone else... While Neill and his movement considered self-directed play a basic right of the individual and essential to our lifelong pursuit of well being, the new educational paradigm often reduces the value of play to the purpose of optimizing productivity. In other words, entrepreneurial self-directed learning does not question reductive functions of education, but merely attempts to update it with corporate management tools in sync with a narrow definition of success that aligns with the incentives of the post-industrial innovation economy.

Education has become a basic human need, as basic as the need for food, clothing, and shelter, and we speak of equal access to institutionalized education as a human right. Resisting reduction at the level of child-rearing is therefore particularly challenging. While access to institutionalized education can indeed serve as an effective tool to counterbalance persistent and increasing inequality, on a deeper level we must recognize that the current entanglement of economic viability and basic security has led us to a more and more reductionist understanding of childhood and child-rearing as a primary means to job preparation. This approach does not allow children to measure success by how much they are thriving; rather, it trains them to measure success by how much they keep the economy thriving, even in situations when it comes at the expense of their well-being as well as that of their communities.

Children are born with the ability to identify and question this kind of reductionism through unbiased and boundless play, but in most cases we adults have come to ignore this actual genius of childhood for the sake of safeguarding the current paradigm. Children are the only group about whom it is still accepted to say explicitly what has become unacceptable to say about almost any other group in society: *Too much freedom is not good for them, and they benefit from being under our control.* If they don’t cease to question this power dynamic, if they perhaps even become defiant, anxious, or depressed, they are made to believe it is their fault—that there is nothing wrong with the system, but that the problem lies in their inability to master it. Children who fail to conform are either marginalized and suspended, or diagnosed with an increasing number of disorders, such as dyslexia, ADHD, ASD, SPD or EFD, and given medication, therapies, and special services to help them tolerate the powerlessness and unhappiness they are experiencing.

What if we collectively addressed the paradigm layer instead, and, just like Neill, make school, and society, fit the child again? Is it perhaps our own inner child, which, scared
to death of getting nudged, corrected, cajoled, bribed, or disciplined again, impairs our capacity to let our children be... children?

Digging into paradigm layers hurts. It forces us to face our self-deceptions, the identities and narratives we have carefully constructed to distract ourselves from our own struggles to find genuine purpose. The narrowing focus on economic growth produces false expectations that well-being is something to be earned in a distant future, like a reward for present sacrifices. Well-being, however, is not something to be earned. It is a paradigm that should inform the purpose of any and all pursuits. If we want to support children in prioritizing well-being, we need to thoughtfully intervene in systems that tend to pass on reductionist views to coming generations—that is, to abolish reductive metrics for growth in current standards of child rearing and grant our children the right and security to live by more individual and comprehensive definitions of success.

It may be no surprise that Erich Fromm was one of Neill’s greatest supporters. In his foreword to Neill’s book, he argues:

“If it can happen once in Summerhill, it can happen everywhere once the people are ready for it. Indeed there are no problem children, as the author says, but only ‘problem parents’ and a ‘problem humanity.’ I believe Neill’s work is a seed which will germinate. In time, his ideas will become generally recognized in a new society in which man himself and his unfolding are the supreme aim of all social effort.”

Can alumni of democratic schools, free schools and unschooling communities perhaps show us new pathways to a less reductionist society? That is, to envision leadership as a shared responsibility rather than a power exercise of a few winners, to deploy principles of adaptation that allow any type of interest, skill, and ability to provide meaning and merit to the whole, and, most importantly, to elevate well-being to a shared purpose and encourage each individual, each generation, to redefine and nourish its meaning for themselves?

While these aspirations might seem unattainable in consideration of how profoundly the paradigm would have to shift, we can all be encouraged to reflect as individuals on the values that we choose to engage with the children in our lives. We can learn to see children as whole human beings and less like moldable works in progress, to get to know their perspectives with genuine interest, and to provide the support they request, not just the support we think they should have. We can hereby learn to reflect
on our own biases from years of reductionist education and manage the unease that arises as we react to new mindsets of new generations. That way, we may be able to get out of the way of our children and allow them to flourish as the unique individuals, and generation, that they are. The sooner we replace the questions “What are our children learning, and what are they not learning?” with “Are they thriving, and if not, what is getting in the way of their thriving?” the sooner we can shift our paradigm toward shared flourishing. The courage to resist reductionism in child rearing is an investment in the well-being of the generation that will one day lead us.

Footnotes

5. cf. Holt, John: How Children Fail (1964); Dennison, George: The Lives of Children (1969); Kozol, Jonathan: Death At An Early Age (1967); Goodman, Paul: Compulsory Mis-Education (1963); and Illich, Ivan: Deschooling Society (1971)

